North Scott Junior High School

The Principal: "I've been frustrated by national and state requirements but deep down feel joy that we are focusing on improving student learning and instruction. This is a model that helps us do this. It is a lot of work, but it is producing the right results. It's not that bad once you get into it. Get right into it and give it a try."

Initial Implementation of the Iowa Professional Development Model

A. About the District

The North Scott Community School District (NSCSD) includes seven schools (one high school, one junior high school and five elementary schools) and serves 3000 students in pre-K through 12th grade. The town of Eldridge is approximately five miles north of Davenport and serves as a "bedroom" community for people who commute to Davenport for work. Although Eldridge is small and rural in character, the schools have a suburban flavor.

Students in the NSCSD are primarily white and middle class. Ethnic minorities and English language learners are about 1 percent of the total student population, while low SES students are 14 percent of the total population. The special education population is at 12 percent of the total student population.

North Scott Junior High School (NSJHS) enrolls 500 students in grades seven and eight and demographically closely resembles the district. The school has one administrator, Principal Dave Griffin. In addition, the district curriculum coordinator (Cindy VanDeWalle) resides in the building, and an on-site reading specialist works with all subject area NSJH teachers. Forty-four teachers work at NSJH.

Department of Education Site Visit

Department of Education (DE) staff visited North Scott Junior High School on March 11, 2004. The Principal (Dave Griffin), District Curriculum Coordinator (Cindy VanDeWalle) and the entire leadership team were interviewed as a group. The principal and individual teachers were interviewed during the day, and most classrooms observed. In addition, two collaborative teams were interviewed during their regular meetings. The AEA 9 consultant who has worked closely with this school, Maggie Van Fossen, participated in group interviews, classroom visits, and individual interviews. She also attended DE training on the Iowa Professional Development Model (IPDM) with the North Scott leadership team throughout the year.

B. Applying the Operating Principles

Focus on Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

North Scott Junior High's approach to the operating principles that guide the IPDM was focused and straightforward. Their data analysis identified student needs in the area of reading and the majority of their professional development agenda centered on reading instruction.

"There's now more unity within teams. In the past, [teams] had their own little pet focus, but now we're working as a whole school on the same strategy. We're all working harder on our PD focus. Teachers are part of planning for every in-service; we have focus and accountability and a support system from Rita (reading specialist)."

Participative Decision-making

North Scott has a tradition of distributed leadership. While the principal is clearly a strong leader with great influence, teacher teams exist for decision-making in multiple areas of school initiative. The expectations of the IPDM for shared decision-making required little adjustment in the organization of this school.

North Scott Junior High's leadership team for professional development includes the principal, reading specialist, curriculum coordinator and a teacher representative from each of the four grade level teams. The leadership team meets weekly and addresses elements of the PD cycle as needed. This year, the team has spent considerable time focusing on data: what to collect, how to analyze it, how to share results, how to transfer data handling tasks to collaborative teams, etc.

Leadership

The principal is clearly the instructional leader at North Scott Junior High. He participates in leadership team meetings, is knowledgeable about PD content and its implementation in his school. The principal routinely conducts informal walk-throughs. He keeps the focus of the school on data analysis and goals for student achievement, and he protects staff from competing initiatives by screening requests/expectations that impinge on the school from local, state and federal levels.

Simultaneity

The leadership team and general faculty appeared to be clearly focused on their reading initiative. However, earlier initiatives in which the school participated, e.g., Boys Town, were being maintained with their own dedicated governing committees. A possible future problem lies in multiple district initiatives currently being considered (e.g., Professional Learning Communities). A challenge for the leadership team will be to integrate current PD focus on instructional strategies for reading with future initiatives in such a way that both support the student achievement goal rather than compete for teacher time and attention.

C. The Professional Development Cycle
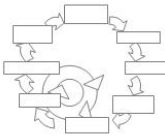
As is true of all the schools and districts who participated in the initial orientation to the Iowa Professional Development Model during the 2003-04 academic year, North Scott addressed some components of the PD cycle more thoroughly than others. North Scott focused on the collection and analysis of student data as well as data on implementation of their reading strategies. While the school has made great strides in their ability to handle data and to ensure that all teachers can analyze data, working with data continues to be a priority area at the school. One person on each collaborative team has had special training in data collection and analysis and leads his/her team in working with the data they generate. These data managers were trained by the AEA to use Excel for the analysis of ITBS data. Data managers share analyzed data, including implementation data, with their teams on a monthly basis.

Collecting and Analyzing Student Data

ITBS data were analyzed for the entire district at grades 4, 8 and 11 to provide a context for junior high students. North Scott Community School District students are proficient in reading in grades 4, 8, and 11 respectively at the 83%, 72% and 80% levels. Of particular concern was the gap between low SES students and the general population in reading, a gap of 20 to 30 percentile points. Also of concern was the gap between IEP and non-IEP students in the school, a gap which ranged from 20 to 50 percentile points. [Twelve percent of students at North Scott have IEPs.] The figures for proficiency in math are 82%, 72% and 83%, respectively. Item analyses of ITBS data revealed that junior high students in reading scored highest in factual recall of information, with ability to infer and interpret, analyze and generalize generally lower. Math concepts and problem solving were generally strong but weaknesses were identified in the area of computation. The decision was made, however, to focus on identified reading deficiencies during the 2003-2004 academic year.

Goal Setting

Data analysis led to the following goal for increased student achievement (to be addressed through the school's PD agenda):

❑ Increase the percentage of low SES students in the proficient category of the ITBS in reading at the intermediate school level. *[Magnitude of increase not specified.]*

❑ Increase the percentage of low SES students in the proficient category of the ITBS in math at the intermediate school level. *[Again, magnitude of increase not specified.]*

Principal: "There's no way to get around the issue of multiple goals. To keep a focus on the current PD agenda, I try to space initiatives so that one is pretty well in place before starting another and build a lot of leaders within the faculty so that can address more than one thing at a time. I try to make any new initiatives complement our initiative in reading."

Selecting Content

Working within a district goal to improve reading comprehension from kindergarten through 12th grade, the school elected to focus on the higher-order comprehension abilities of its students. The target of the shared learning at the building level was the Think Aloud and Graphic Organizer instructional strategies.

North Scott had a several-year history of addressing reading through the content areas. The decision was made--primarily on the recommendation of the reading specialist and AEA support staff--to apply think aloud and graphic organizers to reading comprehension in all content areas. The research base on graphic organizers and think alouds was not consulted in depth by the faculty or the leadership team,

"Research on reading comprehension is so big. Selecting something to address a particular problem focuses you. Try not to tackle something too big."

"Content network is a wonderful resource – the AEA could hardly make it without it."

although an AEA consultant provided one study on think alouds. The team appeared to select content toward which they were favorably disposed and then seek corroboration of their choice in the research base. (Most schools will need additional training in consulting a body of research within a given area).

Designing Process for Professional Development

The principal of North Scott and the district curriculum director put considerable time and thought into restructuring the schedule to provide time for training and collaboration.
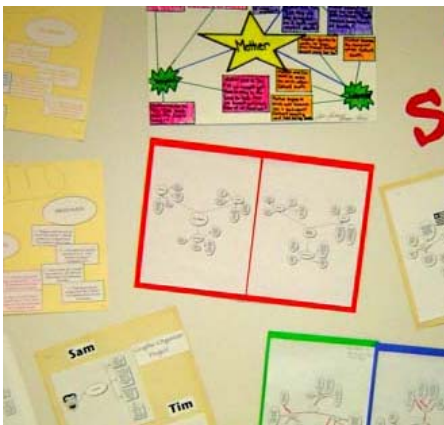
Initial training was provided for all teachers on two 2-hour late start days, with the bulk of instruction focusing on "Think Aloud". Interdisciplinary teams were given common planning periods daily, with different days dedicated to specific tasks (e.g., reading strategies, student concerns, interdisciplinary business, etc.) On the days reserved for the study of reading strategies, the reading specialist shared taped demonstrations, materials, offered help with planning, and facilitated visits to classrooms. The reading specialist also offered in-class demonstrations for teachers who requested them. Collaborative teams were committed to trying lessons with the new strategies and to observing others teach the lessons.

A day of training on graphic organizers was provided all district staff by the district. In addition, the district provided a day of training on the construction of test items for the development of formative measures.

It was unclear from our discussion how much theory and demonstration actually occurred during training events.

On-Going Cycle

The on-going cycle of learning opportunities, collaborative team meetings, the study of implementation, and the analysis of formative student data occurred primarily in the structure of team meetings. Most of the training was provided by an on-site reading specialist and some support was provided by AEA staff.

"The PD model gives us permission to retrain, to try again, based on the information from our logs. It helps to try things over time."

The schedule for learning opportunities and collaboration were combined on the PD schedule for the year:

❑   Daily team meetings (one per week dedicated to reading) – 40 minutes
❑   District PD Days – seven (of which two were devoted to training in reading strategies)
❑   Six two-hour late start sessions – total of four hours devoted to reading strategies

All teachers are expected to attend training in learning strategies.

Collaboration and Implementation

The North Scott Junior High staff has established clear routines for working together collaboratively. They have identified roles and procedures for collaborative team meetings and appear to work together productively on assigned tasks. While they have spent some time developing procedures for working together, they have not felt the need for specialized training in "how to collaborate".

"It is important for the special education teacher to be part of the team so that all teachers have a common language and know the same content."

"It is helpful to have time with peers to work and learn together and that the time for professional development is build into our schedule."

"Teams need to stick to business and stay on task."

"Working as a whole school on the same thing has increased unity within teams. Participating in the planning of every in-service."

As has already been described, collaboration to work on the implementation of Think Alouds was designated for one 40-minute period a week. Lesson planning was not included in this session; rather, this time was used for additional training and the logistics for scheduling visits to observe lessons or to get in-class demonstrations.

The implementation plan developed by the leadership team included the expectation that all teachers would use the Think Aloud strategy in their classroom instruction. Specific targets for frequency of use, however, were not specified in the plan.

Two forms of data were collected to document implementation of the Think Aloud strategy: A weekly log, on which each teacher recorded use of reading strategies and a bi-weekly form on which teachers recorded their estimates of skill with the Think Aloud strategy and noted additional training needs. Data collected on these forms were shared in teams, forwarded to the principal and leadership team, who compiled data for the entire faculty and shared at faculty meetings. Currently the school average is two to three Think Alouds per week per teacher, although Language Arts teachers are using the strategy most frequently and math teachers least often.

At the time of our site visit, no system was in place for looking objectively at the quality of Think Aloud lessons. Interestingly, while implementation efforts were focused on the Think Aloud strategy, classroom visits revealed a high incidence and evidence of graphic organizer lessons but not Think Aloud lessons.

Formative Data Collection

To examine the impact of newly learned reading strategies (Think Aloud, Graphic Organizers) on the higher order comprehension abilities of students, a series of teacher-made tests were devised.

"Looking at formative data is new for us."

Each subject area team selected two reading selections within their subject areas and followed a five-question format for testing student understanding of the concepts. All content areas, including art, music and PE, designed test questions for their content areas. The five questions included main idea or author's purpose, supporting details, inference, causal relationships, and vocabulary. The tests were administered in September and May and served as pre/post tests for student comprehension. At the pretest, ability to draw inferences was weakest of the tested skills. Spring tests reveal growth in ability to draw inferences and determine main ideas with supporting details but vocabulary scores dropped. It is unclear how comparable the tests are between departments; the leadership team is exploring standardized options for getting this information on a regular basis so that test items would be more equivalent in terms of difficulty.

Departments summarize data they collect and provide these data to the principal and leadership team for PD planning. Individual student data are retained at the department level so teachers can target specific students experiencing specific comprehension difficulties.

Summative Data

ITBS data will be used to evaluate program effectiveness. ITBS is administered in the fall in the North Scott district and the first evaluation will occur mid-year in the 2004-2005 academic year.

External Technical Assistance

North Scott Junior High served as its own provider for staff development. While the AEA provided technical assistance in data collection and analysis and also provided some training and resources in the Think Aloud strategy, the school has primarily depended on its reading specialist for on-site training.

"AEA has been a big support as have Cindy (curriculum director) and Rita (reading specialist). Because reading was a district goal and our PD was aligned, we got more support."

D. Observations About the Site Visit

For external visitors, one powerful norm was apparent throughout the site visit. The norm so clearly communicated in all settings was that student achievement is everybody's job and collective learning and examination of personal practice is everyone's responsibility.

The North Scott Junior High School has made excellent progress in its first effort to implement the Iowa Professional Development Model. It has solved the issues raised by the operating principles (focus on curriculum and instruction, shared decision-making, strong and distributed leadership, and maintaining focus on a single issue while attending to the other business that must be addressed for students in any given year. The major challenge in this area will be the tendency of districts to enthusiastically introduce multiple good, interesting, but nevertheless distracting initiatives that will diffuse the school's energy and focus.

This site was strong in the areas of analyzing data and providing time for learning opportunities and collaborative teams. It has made promising first steps toward monitoring an implementation and collecting formative data. Primary agendas in the coming year will be to structure teams for planning of more sophisticated use of Think Alouds, ways to objectively assess the quality and/or fidelity of Think Aloud lessons, and the identification of more standardized measures for use in formative data collection.

We largely agree with North Scott's self-analysis of its own growth during its initial trial with the IPDM. Even though the school was strong as it entered the pilot project, it reported sizable growth in maintaining a focus on curriculum and instruction, engaging in intensive and focused professional development, and productive collaboration with peers. Even in areas where the school was already strong, such as norms for universal staff participation in PD and collective goals for student learning, they reported growth. And they were realistic about areas in which they had shown growth but had considerable work still to do, such as collecting and using formative data, garnering external technical assistance and defining and studying their implementation.

Team comment – "We like knowing that the district sees this as a priority and that it is not going to be dropped."

"The most powerful aspect of PD this year was having the model itself, something that says "This is the process to follow" and provides us a structure. Team leaders now know so much more about PD from using the model."